

Paper from
Gilgit Conference '82

INDUS KACHISTAN

- an ethnographic and linguistic overview -

by

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During the Great Game, when the British officers were obsessed by the idea that Russian invasion was imminent, they pushed the northwestern frontiers of the British Indian Empire forward to the main ranges of the Hindukush and Karakoram. In so doing, they "plugged the door" to the Cossacks who had already appeared in the Pamirs.

For the Britons, it was an integral part of their policy not to conquer the gorges of the Indus north of Tarsela and the adjacent craters. Conquest would have required the construction of roads and bridges, and this infrastructure would have been only too helpful to an invading army in case of war.

Thus a large area on both sides of the river was allowed to remain Tribal Territory during the whole period of British rule: inaccessible, forbidden and of course, unexplored.

Before this decision came into effect, however, an intelligent and active Political Agent at Gilgit, John Diddulph, had collected a body of information about this area, information still relevant today. (Diddulph: Tribes of the Hindookush; reprinted 1977 by Indus Publications Pakistan).

This tribal territory often called Yaghistan (land of the free) did not remain quite stable. Starting from Tangir, Pakhtun Wali Khan, a scion of the Khushwaqi family, tried to carve out his own kingdom which however collapsed when he was murdered by his freedom-loving subjects.

Followed in 1958.

The areas inside of the great knee of the Indus east of the gorges however remained as they were: a blank spot on the linguistic and cultural map of Asia.

The opening of this last sanctuary took place when a road was built along the Indus. The Army Engineers and their Chinese counterparts later widened this road to form the Karakorum Highway. At the same time, the Government of Pakistan decided to include the valleys west of the Indus (formerly annexed by Swat) in the newly-created district of Kohistan. The full impact of these innovations was created only when the Kohistan Development Project Organization (the Kohistan Development Board of today -- the KDB) was created to carry out an intensive socio-economic uplift. It has the task to create a new infrastructure, to assimilate secluded valleys to the general standard of Pakistan.

Nevertheless, the previous linguistic and cultural situation soon to be lost to the past should be studied before such changes are fully effective in all spheres of life.

Brigadier (Ret'd) Jan Nadir Khan, the Chairman and Managing Director of the KDB, clearly saw the need for bridging this gap. He was instrumental in enabling me and my collaborator Mr. Adam Nayyar to undertake a preliminary exploration just

situation prevailing in Tangir and Darel, valleys I had seen 25 years ago as a member of the expeditions mentioned above.

We would certainly not undertake more than a short survey, but some of our observation should be presented here, especially because they correct or supplement the few scientific reports written so far.

I. In the areas west of the Indus, a somewhat better level of civilization had been obtained earlier (by F. Barth), so I wish only to add a few remarks.

1. According to the data obtained on the spot from local officers, the Kohistan District west of the Indus has, according to the last census (1961), a surprisingly large population. There is a population of 130,000 living in the north administered from Dasu, and 210,000 in the south with its centre in Patan, making in all 340,000 inhabitants.

Gidduloh however reported for Duber 1500, for Patan 5000, for Seo 400 and for Kandia 1500 "fighting men". Considering the number of fighting men normally in one family, one could estimate the total population in those days to have been between 30,000 and 40,000.

This certainly indicates a demographic explosion, supported perhaps by the fact that maize has replaced most of the other crops, namely barley and millet. This enabled more people to

2. In the Linguistic Survey of India (Vol VIII/2, pp. 522 ff.), the language of the valleys west of the Indus is referred to as Maiyā. This name is unknown to the present speakers, they call their idiom "Kohistan" or, in some places, "Khili". There are, however, two dialects of "Khili": One dialect called Manzari is spoken in Kandia/Utur and in Duber. The two places are rather far apart from one another -- forty miles as the crow flies, but their high meadows are closer to each other. This is typical of Kohistan. Half the year is spent in the alpine zone, where economic and cultural contacts occur. The winter, spent in the gloomy confines of the lower valleys, is a time of isolation.

The other dialect, Mani, is spoken in all the other valleys, even between Kandia and Duber. The larger valleys speaking the dialect are Seo, Kayal, Patan, Jijal, Ranulla (a side-valley of Duber) and the area northwest of Besham, where Bankhar (also referred to as Bankhat) is the most prominent settlement (Biddulph 1977:12 mentions it as Bunkar). The villagers of Sangkari in Tangir who speak Kanyamāli most probably originated from there (Buddruss 1955:7).

The dialects are so interlocked that it makes no sense to call one of them "Eastern" and the other "Western". There must be some connection between Mani-Manzari and the rather enigmatic term Maiyā (Buddruss 1955:5), which also appears in Biddulph's work (1960/1977:12) as Maiyon.

Guard taught the locals to appreciate the benefits of civilization.

It is clear that the majority of the population on this side (more than 220,000) speak Shina, but their culture differs considerably from that of their brethren in other parts of the vast territory where this most widespread language of the Western Himalayas is spoken -- from Chitral to Ladakh.

The reason became obvious after a few interviews. This population has felt the full impact of Pashtun influence. Their kinship groups are thus called "khels", and - even more important - they (the Shina-speakers of the Indus) have adopted the famous Vesh system. This system entails the exchange and redivision of cultivable land at regular intervals, thus creating the economic basis for an egalitarian society. Such Vesh systems always have an inherent problem: should the land be divided in equal shares to all males ("Tang Vesh"), or should it be given to the khels in equal amount? In the latter case, some khels sometimes have only a few members, while others are numerically stronger. Inevitably, the "proletarians", i.e., the producers of many children, favour the former solution, while others resist because they wish to preserve the larger shares possible in the second solution because they did not have so many sons in the past. In some areas, the Vesh system has not been in practice for a long time and is half-forgotten, but in areas where the population exploded and there is scarcity of land (as in Palas), the question

which encompasses almost half of the landowners, subdivided of course into many smaller units. Have they something to do with the Dirumiling, one of the most important "tribes" of Hunza? It has been said that they came from Jaglot on the mouth of the Sai Valley, where they allegedly still have relatives.

Kolai however has only real Shina, not counting the craftsmen (which were in the central areas of the Shina-speakers lumped together in the castes of "kamin" and "dom"). This anomaly was already known to Biddulph.

It would be false to consider Jalkot, Palas and Kolai each as a valley as suggested by the large-scale maps of the area. Jalkot was originally a village, Palas and Kolai are in fact communities, as Biddulph correctly observed. They (the people of Palas and Kolai) consider as their principal territory the large tracts of summer fields and meadows 2000 metres above sea-level and higher. These high meadows and fields are not divided by difficult ridges or high passes, although they are drained by rivulets joining the Indus at considerable distances from one another. Only in winter does the population concentrate itself in the valleys near the Indus.

Biddulph mentioned the surprising fact that besides Shina, three other languages are spoken in the area. One of them, Chilis, is certainly still alive, and one vocabulary of it was collected in Jalkot. It is close to the Shina spoken by all immediate

village of Batera, a strange language incomprehensible to outsiders is still spoken. Biddulph mentioned this while confessing his inability to provide a suitable sample for his book. We were thus eager to include a sample of the language in our lexicostatistical lists.

It turned out that Batera is very near to Gesham, just on the other (eastern) side of the Indus river, a few kilometres upstream. We received the required words for our lists from students of Batera attending schools at Gesham. Later, we boarded a skin-raft and crossed over to Batera, an operation quite comfortable in winter, but somewhat risky in summer when the Indus is in high flood.

In Batera, we got the surprising information that the number of Batervi-speakers is much higher than we had expected -- between 25,000 and 30,000 (Biddulph reported only about 120 houses). Their territory is limited in the north by the Lorin stream, and to the south by the Pashtu-speaking Allāiwāls.

The people of Batera firmly believe that their forefather Machok came from Chilas, where he was ousted by his own brother Butá after heavy fighting.

This may well be true, because there is a well-known legend in Chilas (quoted by Biddulph 1980:16) that "a disastrous war broke out between two brothers, Bât and Matchuk, which ended in the defeat and expulsion of all the partisans of the latter."

The legend of origin, romantic as it is, would provide a suitable explanation to the general character of the vocabularies collected from the people of Bata. There is a considerable similarity to Shina, a lesser likeness to Mani and Manzari, and some deviant words, perhaps indicative of a substratum adopted from earlier (non-Dardic?) settlers.

Whatever the case, Bateria is a challenge to scholars, a challenge so far not taken up. Bateria was visited allegedly only once by foreigners two years ago. I do not know whether this party made a linguistic survey preceding our own rather sketchy attempt. There is perhaps still a chance of discovering a hitherto unknown Aryan language.

Conclusively, I would like to add a few words about the history of Indus Kohistan. Very little is known about it and no written sources are available, but a comparison with peoples speaking related languages provides an attempted reconstruction in order to explain some peculiar and even strange customs of the present.

Between the plains and the large valley systems in the centre of the mountains (Chitral, Yasin, Gilgit, Baltistan), where kingdoms flourished and horses were used intensively for warfare, there existed a zone of smaller independent communities whose defenders fought on foot. To this zone belong the tribes on both sides of the lower Kunar valley, Dir Kohistan, Swat Kohistan and finally, Indus Kohistan. Geographers ask why just this zone was so difficult

this happened, Islam spread over all of Kohistan along with Pashtun institutions such as Vesh and the Pashtun value system. We may presume that during the previous period, women enjoyed a considerable independence and even looseness, which had to come to an end with the new order.

A further change took place a hundred years ago, when Kohistan was practically surrounded by British-controlled territories. Major wars between whole villages or even communities became obsolete. Biddulph had reported about a war between Palas and Kolai, resulting in raids on each other every two or three months. Such a form of conflict presupposes a considerable internal solidarity.

As soon as such external activities declined, the internal tensions and feuds increased. It became fashionable to kill and die for the land, but even more so for the women, who had become a precious and sometimes rather rebellious property.. Revenge was taken even after a very long time.

When the Wali of Swat and the Government of Pakistan sent their police into the valleys, they found what one of my former interpreters referred to as a "killing system", i.e., a system of multiple interlaced feuds which placed a considerable stress on the whole population.

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